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ABSTRACT

In contrast to the European immigration to the United States, the African immigrant encountered economic, psychological, and emotional disorientation to such an extent that these effects continue to influence and mold the lives of Afro-Americans. This document explores the Afro-American immigrant experience through a study of some of the plays written by August Wilson. "Fences," "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," and "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" are analyzed from the perspective of the black experience in terms of past events and to explain the present in terms of a history which includes emigration from the rural South to northern U.S. cities. The effects of this migration on Afro-American family life and on individual blacks are examined by analyzing excerpts and passages from plays which highlight the anger, frustration, and exploitation of blacks and the resultant instability of the black family. (JHP)

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FROM SOUTH TO NORTH U.S.A.: THE AFRO-AMERICAN IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN THE PLAYS OF AUGUST WILSON

by

Beverly Lynne Aronowitz

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In the setting notes to introduce the first act, August Wilson makes explicit the Afro-American immigrant experience as the social and emotional context of Fences.

> Near the turn of the century, the destitute of Europe sprang on the city with tenacious claws and an honest and solid dream. The city devoured them. . . .
>
> The city grew. It nourished itself and offered each man a partnership limited only by his talent, his guile, and his willingness and capacity for hard work.
>
> The descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome nor participation. They came from places called the Carolinas and the Virginias, Georgia, Alabama. . . . They came strong, eager, searching. The city rejected them and they fled and settled along the riverbanks and under bridges in shallow, ramshackle houses made of sticks and tarpaper. . . . and in quiet desperation and vengeful pride, they stole, and lived in pursuit of their own dream: That they could breathe free, finally, and stand to meet life with the force of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon. ("Setting," Fences. THEATRE (Yale, Summer/Fall, 1985), I, i, 39).

If any of us were present at the Yale production from April 30th to May 25th, 1985, we would have entered the theatre on York Street in New Haven to find a "two-story brick house set back off a small alley in a big neighborhood city." ("Setting," I,i,39). Although

such humble and sad housing exists for the play in 1957 and later in 1964. similar nearly impoverished dwellings exist in our 1980's in cities such as Asbury Park, East Orange and Newark, where black families work hard to scrape together a decent but threadbare subsistence. Memory of the past, too, hovers and influences these lives and these wills to assert and succeed, memory of that journey. now mythic, from South to North, U.S.A. Remembered and retold through the decades by the old to the young are those initial hopes but final disappointments of that emmigration, this story gradually becoming family then racial myth. Through the telling came a way to understand the past and explain the present, a way to reify past courage but come to terms with present need--present failure.

Many in the public domain tell us that the disruption in black American family life might be traced to an outmoded welfare system; to the ghetto as an attitude rather than a place; to a weak black male, to a dominant black female. the single parent; to the absence of skills, to permanent joblessness, to the lure of an underground economy, drugs.[1] The list goes on. For the playwright, this list of evils is the consequence of a tragic history of a people who, at the turn of this century, emigrated from South to North. Their trials and disappointments, especially in the face of the successes of European counterparts, have had emotional and psychological impact and long-lasting consequences on Afro-American family life and on the individual Afro-American psyche.

Troy Maxon the central figure of Fences is a strong man, a responsible man. but a deeply angry man. Each dramatic episode, built on conflict between Troy and other family members, is energized by Troy's present anger based on past frustration: his father's callous mistreatment of the youthful Troy; his failed professional baseball

career; his inability--that is up to the present action--to succeed to a position better than refuse collector because of northern Jim Crow. Nevertheless, Troy is a dutiful man who feels responsible. After a work week of hard labor, Friday evenings finds Troy and his long-time pal Bono walking back to the Maxson house, laughing, talking, opening up a bottle--a joyful ritual to forget a week which ate away at his life's purpose and manhood. But first and dutifully, Troy offers up his paycheck to Rose who always has something good waiting on the stove (meatloaf, baked limas and cornbread). They settle down to reminisce, that tradition of telling long stories.[2] What Troy and Bono finally get down to is the myth of the immigration or "the walking blues." Bono remembers: "Back in those days what you talking about . . . niggers used to travel all over. They get up one day and see where the day ain't sitting right with them and they walk out their front door and just take on down one road or another and keep on walking. . . . Ain't owned nothing but was on their back. . . . so you didn't have to worry about leaving nothing behind or carrying nothing with you for that matter. Just walk on till you come to something else. Ain't you never heard of nobody having the walking blues? Well that's what you call it when you just take off like that. (I,ii,51).

When Troy was young he walked too: " I walked on down to Mobile and hitched up with some of them fellows that was heading this way. Got up here and found out . . . not only couldn't you get a job . . . you couldn't find no place to live. I thought I was in freedom. Shh. (I,ii, 52).

One way to defeat Jim Crow was to enter professional sports; but thinking back to the forties a mere token for integration comes to mind, Jackie Robinson, for example. It was color, Troy insists, that barred him: "I done seen a hundred niggers play baseball better than Jackie Robinson. Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn't even make! What you talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson wasn't nobody. I'm talking about if you could play ball then they ought to have let you play. Don't care what color you were." (I, i, 41).

But Rose, a rational calming voice, reminds Troy: "Troy, why don't you admit you was too old to play in the major leagues? For once . . . why don't you admit that?" (I, iii, 48).

Rose's remark underlines the irrational component of Troy's anger, a mixture of his reaction to injustice heightend by personal distortion, which, had Troy the insight and the will, could be righted. But Troy acts wholely on perceptions warped by years of bitter regret. Acting on these feelings, for example, he denies his son the opportunity to take a football scholarship, Cory's only way to enter college: "I told that boy about that football stuff. The white man ain't gonna let him get nowhere with that football." (I, i, 41).

Rose counters: "Times have changed since you was playing baseball, Troy. That was before the war. Times have changed a lot since then." (I, i, 41).

Times, although tough and unfair still for the Afro-American, have changed--even for Troy; Act I concludes with Troy's successful grievance to his union to be the city's first Negro driver rather than hauler of refuse. Troy's triumph makes no dent, however, in those years of accumulated anger. He feels fenced in and fences out those who love him: his escape--predictably, destructively--another woman. Troy confesses to Rose: "I'm gonna be a daddy. I'm gonna be somebody's daddy." (II, i, 55).

Rose's justified outrage indicts not only Troy but a pattern of black family life:

> Been married eighteen years and I got to live to see the day you tell me you been seeing another woman and done fathered a child by her. And you know I ain't never wanted no half nothing in my family. My whole family is half. Everybody got different fathers and mothers . . . my two sisters and my brother. Can't hardly tell who's who. Can't never sit down and talk about Papa and Mama. It your papa and your mama and my papa and my mama . . . . (II, i, 56).

Through Rose, the playwright courageously confesses the instability of black family life. But Rose's outcry also confirms what Afro-Americans feel to be wholesome and good; she offers the ideal of a whole family to be prized and striven for, an ideal indeed confirmed by many Black Americans.[3] If any of us were witness to that performance, Rose's outcry would have captured our feelings in just that compelling way theatre takes hold. It took guts, I feel, for the playwright to tell it like it is rather than shrink behind "uplift" dialogue and plot. Wilson is asking us to look at the complexities created by personal shortcoming exacerbated by racial history. He's not making excuses, only probing beyond the stereotypic pattern to understand. Part of our understanding comes from empathetic knowledge of the unfortunate immigration experiences of "free" Afro-Americans coming from South to North.

Along with story telling, the Afro-American people sing about their history and about themselves to understand and take hold of life: They call it the"blues."

> Ma Rainey: White folks don't understand about the blues. They hear it come out, but they don't know how it got there. They don't understand that's life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life.
>
> Cutler: That's right. You get that understanding and you done got a grip on life to where you can hold your head up and go on to see what else life got to offer. (Ma Rainey's'Black Bottom'. (N.Y.: NAL/Plume, 1985), II, 82- 83).

Wilson sets Ma Rainey in a recording studio, "the Race division" in 1927. (Program Notes. Yale Repertory Theatre. April 3 to April 21, 1984). The lead character is based on Gertrude Pridgett (1886- 1939) who, along with the better-known Bessie Smith won contracts to record the blues for commercial distribution; for, suddenly, in the twenties, in northern cities, the recorded music of black Americans for black Americans became a lucrative commodity.[4] The entire action of the play is a recording session: Irvin and Mel have contracted Ma Rainey and her small band, musicians all their lives, who tour southern "tent shows," northern negro night clubs, whorehouses. We suspect the recordings made this particular afternoon will yield more profit for the company than the modest wages paid to the musicians. The relationship between employers and musicians is tense, the musicians wary of

of a hassel simply because they are black. For instance, the men need to be paid in cash: "See a nigger with a check, the first thing they think is he done stole it someplace." (II, 106).

Ma Rainey, too, is poised to feel out and avoid exploitation, to exact her payment of respect: "Madame Rainey! Get it straight! Madame Rainey!"(I, 49). Majestic Ma Rainey is always in control: "Why you all keep it so cold in here? . . . You all wanna make some records, you better put some heat on in here. . . ."(I, 52). "What you all say don't count with me. You understand? Ma listens to her heart. Ma listens to the voice inside her." (I, 63). "We'll be ready to go when Madame says we're ready. That the way it goes around here." (I, 64). "Where's my Coke? I need a coke. . . . You know I don't sing nothing without my Coca-Cola!" (II, 76).

Regal and petulant--but to a purpose--Ma can have it her way: she will record her version of 'Black Bottom,' a down-home version and insist that her stuttering nephew introduce the recording--just to build his confidence and put him on the payroll. She knows she is being exploited, but she'll take what she can get and give back as little as possible to Mr. Charlie: "Ma don't stand for no shit. Wanna take my voice and trap it in them fancy boxes with all them bottons and dials. . . and then too cheap to buy me a Coca-Cola." (II, 79).

The playtext heard at Yale Rep and the New American Library text differ in a small but essential way, relevant to Wilson's abiding involvement with the parallel experience of emmigrating Afro-Americans and Europeans. The record company execs periodically appease Ma's tempermental outbursts with dialogue this audience member heard as "Remember, Ma, we Blacks and Jews got to stick together." The NAL text offers only Ma's cynical reminder to Irving and Mel "to stick together" when she thinks them out of line; racial references are

omitted.

> Ma Rainey: You watch Irvin right there with the rest of them. He don't care nothing about me either. He's been my manager for six years, always talking about sticking together, and the only time he had me in his house was to sing for some of his friends. (II, 79).

Reference to dissonance between races might be too sensitive a topic , just as the uncomfortable reference "Race Division" printed in the original Yale Rep Program Notes is omitted from the setting notes of the NAL text. Clearly, Wilson made some compromises; but, I feel, the playwright had the immigration motif in mind, was dramatizing through the evocation of "Black" and "Jew" the uncomfortable scenario of one group prospering guilefully at the expense of another.

In Ma Rainey, Levee, the young trumpeter, plays out the urge to destroy because he is prevented from succeeding. The playwright juxtaposes Levee's inexperience and ignitable temperment with the stronger, controlled and controlling (as much as she is able) Ma Rainey. Levee naively believes the record company will support his rendition of the music--a jazzier, fast-paced version--to Ma Rainey's, that he will be offered star status and a band of his own. But Ma has the last word. Levee must settle for five dollars for each of his renditions--nothing more. In truth, he has sold his soul (his music, himself) to the devil (and previously, the band members had engaged in a lengthy story-telling session about a carpetbagger trading in souls for the devil). Levee is emasculated. In an uncontrolled gesture of rage--the rage Troy Maxon feels every day but keeps under wraps--he turns on his own brother, a fellow Black, a fellow musician (Toledo) and stabs him. Levee is, of course, stabbing at the oppressor through Toledo. He is nearly insensible to what he has done:

> (Toledo is limp and heavy and awkward. He slumps back to the floor. Levee gets mad at him.)
> Don't look at me like that! Toledo! Nigger, don't look at me like that! . . . Tell him to close his eyes. . . .
> (The sound of a trumpet is heard, Levee's trumpet, a muted trumpet struggling for the highest of possibilities and blowing pain and warning.) (II, 111).

The play ends on this note of frenzied desperation.

The metaphor of the "blues" as Afro-Americans' expression of self-sufficiency in Ma Rainey is reiterated as "song" in Wilson's most recently produced play Joe Turner's Come and Gone.[5] The setting, a boarding house in Pittsburgh, 1911: the chaos of the Reconstruction seventy years earlier is reflected, still, in the immigrants who find their way to Seth Holly's establishment. Seth has inherited his home from his father, a northern "freedman" who "ain't never even seen no cotton!" (THEATRE (Yale, Summer/Fall, 1986), II, 83). Although settled and feeling superior to the wandering souls who come to rest for a while at his house, Seth shares with these sojourners--but reticent to admit it--the emotional displacement of being frustrated in his efforts to succeed. Seth has a practical vision for success: he wants to create his own business around his skill of crafting pots from sheet metal but is denied by sceptical (or jealous? or exploiting?) town bankers:

> They can't see that. . . . Now how much sense it take to see that? . . . One man making pots is five men making fifty pots. But they can't see that . . . . Neither Mr. Cohen nor Sam Green. . . . Want me to sign over the house to borrow five hundred dollars. I ain't that big a fool. That's all I got. Sign it over to

them and then I won't have nothing." (II, 76).

In contrast to the others, Seth Holly has no myths to haunt him, no dreams to sustain him. He is a realist, a cynic. He is a man with no patience for "songs."

Bynum, a long-time resident of the Holly household, a root man, a seer, a teller of Negro myths of resurrection and salvation ("the shiny man," "bones on the water") defines "the song" as finding one's self-sufficiency, being able to act effectively and, in turn, receive recognition from others: this kind of "song" was rarely learned or bitterly learned by the Afro-American immigrant. If a man has his song and it is "accepted," says Bynum, he "done left his mark on life," and his song "works its full power in the world." (I, 68).

Herald Loomis appears on the scene with his daughter Zonia. Tormented by the memory of his experience of Joe Turner, a slave-master no longer sanctioned by law but by force, Loomis comes north to look for Martha, his wife, these past seven years lost to him while in bondage to Turner. Just a first glance at Loomis, Bynum knows him as one of Joe Turner's captives, a marked man. Under his breath he sings the myth made of the tragic realities of the many captured by the dominant few, all the Joe Turners:

Ohhh Lordy
They tell me Joe Turner's come and gone
Ohhh Lordy
Got my man and gone. (II, 83).

Loomis is possessed with loss, faithlessness. Where was God when the Joe Turners hunted up whole bands of men and kept then in enforced labor years on end? Outraged, maddened, Loomis turns on the boarding house tenents in the midst of a Juba, a joyous "call and response" dance, christianized from African origin.

> Loomis: (in a rage) Stop it! Stop it! (They stop and turn to look at him.) You all sitting up here singing about the Holy Ghost. What's so holy about the Holy Ghost? You singing and singing. You think the Holy Ghost coming. You singing for the Holy Ghost to come? What he gonna do, huh? He gonna come with tongues of fire to burn up your wooly heads? . . . (I, 79).

At the play's end, Loomis encounters his wife, is satisfied just to look into her eyes and to reunite her with Zonia. Martha has become a worker for the church, a deeply religious Christian. To her face, one last time, Loomis denies the christian God but regains his song of self-sufficiency. He says to Martha: "Great big old white man . . . your Mr. Jesus Christ. Standing there with a whip in one hand and tote board in another, and them niggers swimming in a sea of cotton." (II, 88).

Martha pleads that he must open his heart, and Loomis replies:

> I been wading in the water. I been walking all over the river Jordan. But what it get me, huh? I done been baptized with the blood of the lamb and the fire of the Holy Ghost. But what I got, huh? I got salvation? My enemies all around me picking the flesh from my bones. I'm choking on my own blood and all you got to give me is salvation? (II, 88).

When Martha implores Loomis to be cleansed by "the blood of the lamb," Loomis provides his own blood for his own resurrection: he slashes himself across the chest. With this act comes Loomis' denial of the opressing white man's God but the resurrection of Loomis' freedom and self-sufficiency.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone adapts as a major motif a poetic, metaphoric expression based on Afro-American myth. The episodic structure allows the several characters, fellow wanderers, their "arias" of loss, loneliness and disappointment. Metaphor and myth lend expressivity to history, that epoch around 1911 when Afro-Americans walked from South to North, U.S.A.: "They arrive carrying bibles and guitars, their pockets lined with dust and fresh hope . . . . Foreigners in a strange land, they carry as part and parcel of their baggage a long line of separation and dispersement which informs their sensibilities and marks their conduct as they search for ways to reconnect, to reassemble, to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and a whelp of joy." ("Setting Notes," I, 65).

In contrast to the European immigrant, the Afro-American immigration ended in economic, psychological and emotional disorientation, with wounds so deep, the hurt has touched the lives of Afro-American citizens in our decade.

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Notes

1

For a recent evaluation of the breakdown of the traditional black family along with suggestions to remedy and restore time-honored values and cohesion within family life, see Eleanor Holmes Norton, "Restoring the Traditional Black Family," New York Times Magazine, June 2, 1985, pp. 43 ff. to 98.

The Norton article appeared on the 20th anniversary of the controversial "Moynihan Report" written when that senator was Assistant Secretary of Labor. (Daniel P. Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." Washington, D.C.; U.S. Department of Labor, 1965.) Moynihan argued that the single-parent household, headed by women was preventing black males from benefiting and participating in American power structure; lack of cohesive family life rather than racism was seen as the primary source for the inability of black males to succeed.

Michele Wallace, a young black woman, wrote an angry retort to Moynihan's conclusions, interpreting his stance as an attack on black women. Her book proved equally controversial. Black Macho and The Myth of The Superwoman. (New York: Warner Books, 1980). See especially, pp. 157 - 167.

2

James Earl Jones and Mary Alice, who initially interpreted the roles of Troy and Rose Maxon, speak of the play's structural aspects adapted from Afro-American traditions; they especially appreciate the "black dialect" and the story-telling form. In "Building Fences: An Interview with Mary Alice and James Earl Jones," (Yale THEATRE. Summer/Fall, 1985), 67-70, Mary Alice notes she "can also relate to the oral tradition" apparent in the play. ". . . my grandfather, my father, even my mother were always telling stories. That is a very African tradition. Dark people did not write it; it was passed on orally. That's very much a part of what I heard in the play." (69).

James Earl Jones continues: "Yes. My summer nights in Michigan were very similar to this play's situation. I don't remember who wouldn't take it upon himself to entertain or tell a story. On summer nights the gatherings would happen on a porch. Somebody would end up telling a story, and someone else--visitors, guests--would counter with another story." (69).

4 Cited in the Yale Repertory Theatre Program Notes , Ma Rainey's 'Black Bottom' (4/3-4/21, 1984) is Le Roi Jones/Amiri Baraka's commentary on the commercialization of the "blues."

> ". . . Blues, until the time of the classic blues was largely a functional music (the work song). . . .The idea of blues as a form of music that could be used to entertain people on a professional basis, i.e., that people would actually pay to see and hear blues performed, was a revelation. And it was a revelation that gave large impetus to the concept of the 'race' record, commercial recordings aimed strictly toward the Negro market. . . ." (Excerpt from Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and The Music That Developed From It. N.Y.: William Morrow and Company, 1963.)

5 The Newsletter of The Yale Repertory Theatre, Yale Reports, April 29- May 24, 1986, notes that August Wilson's next play is Piano Lessons, to be presented at the theatre in New Haven, Spring, 1987.

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